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ABSTRACT

A study examined how, when, and under what conditions severe dyslexics developed high literacy skills, as well as the role of gender differences in literacy development and professional success. Subjects were 60 highly successful dyslexic adults (30 men and 30 women) and 10 nondyslexic male and female normative controls. Results indicated that literacy development was motivated by avid reading in a content area of passionate personal interest. Both male and female dyslexics on average developed basic fluency between ages 10 and 11. Results revealed two distinct groups of highly successful dyslexics, a compensated group and a partially compensated group. Levels of compensation did not vary by gender. Gender differences were found in topics of personal interest reading and mentoring patterns. Findings suggest a model of dyslexia whose key elements are passionate personal interest in a content area requiring reading; avid, highly focused reading; contextual guessing strategies; and deep schema knowledge. (Contains seven references.) (RS)

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Sixty Successful Dyslexics:

Gender Differences and Literacy Development*

Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Orton Dyslexia Society
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Running head: Gender and Successful Dyslexics' Literacy Development

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How, when, and under what conditions do severe dyslexics develop high level literacy skills? What is the role of gender in literacy development and professional success among highly successful dyslexics? These questions spurred a new study of 60 highly successful dyslexic adults (30 dyslexic men and 30 dyslexic women) and 10 nondyslexic male and female normative controls. Dyslexic subjects included a Nobel laureate, a member of the National Academy of Sciences, a member of the National Academy of Education, and leaders in diverse fields requiring reading (i. e., law, medicine, business, physics, biology, anthropology, education, psychology, theatre, art, and literature).

Results indicated that literacy development was motivated by avid reading in a content area of passionate personal interest for these 60 dyslexics. Both male and female dyslexics on average developed basic fluency between ages 10 and 11. Results revealed two distinct groups of highly successful dyslexics, a compensated group and a partially compensated group. Levels of compensation did not vary by gender. Based on six formal and informal literacy assessments, these 60 dyslexics demonstrated most of the salient characteristics of advanced Stage 5

reading (Chall, 1983). However, despite being powerful comprehenders of sophisticated text, the partially compensated group lagged behind the compensated group and nondyslexic controls in: (1) word recognition, (2) oral reading, (3) spelling, and (4) reading rate.

These successful dyslexics showed strengths in the components of literacy that Chall (1994) has called higher level, "meaning aspects," as distinct from lower level, "print aspects" of literacy. Findings from this study confirmed and extended the results of previous research (Fink, 1992, 1993, 1995/96, 1997) and revealed gender differences in (1) topics of personal interest reading and (2) mentoring patterns of male and female dyslexics that emerged in middle school and continued through subsequent educational levels into the workplace. Gender differences in topics of personal interest reading were statistically significant (chi square = 5.71, $p = .017$).

An outcome of this study is a model of dyslexia that explains how dyslexics, who lack strong integration of basic, lower level "print" skills, construct higher order, sophisticated "meaning" skills. Key elements of the model include: (1) passionate personal interest in a content area requiring reading, (2) avid, highly focused reading, (3) contextual guessing strategies, and (4) deep schema knowledge. Most of these successful dyslexics developed Stage 5 skills through avid reading in a content area of passionate personal interest in conjunction with systematic phonics instruction. These results place the role of students' personal interests at center stage. Highlighted is the need for a balanced approach to literacy instruction that includes both "print" and "meaning" aspects.

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